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ABSTRACT

This is a description of a workshop focusing on the couple in the remarried family, and stressing the development of a balanced, effectively working family system. The workshop content, which functions through didactic presentations, leader-led exercises, group interactions and homework, addresses the following topics: (1) communication skill-building; (2) the loss and acceptance of autonomy; (3) remarriage issues and myths; (4) past and present family relationships; and (5) step-parenting. A bibliography and pictorial representations of remarriage as a blending of two homes and a blended family system are also provided. (Author/HLM)

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SECOND TIME AROUND:
Relationships in Second Marriages

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Together with their children they form a remarried family.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Our workshop for remarrying and remarried couples was begun for three reasons: first, there are an increasing number of remarried families with little attention being given to their needs; second, remarriages are deeply complex and confusing, and families were asking us for assistance in this complexity; and third, because we are in a remarried family, we have a deep personal interest and commitment.

In recent years the number of remarried families has increased sharply. It is estimated that over ten percent of the children under 18 in this country are in remarried families, and the number is increasing. There has been a quantitative increase and a qualitative change in remarriage even though remarriages are not a new phenomenon. Today the formation of remarried families is primarily the result of divorced persons remarrying. Four out of five divorced persons will remarry. Of these it is estimated that forty percent will divorce again. In the past remarried families were formed as the result of the death of a spouse.

Until very recently little attention had been given and little assistance offered to this segment of the population in the preparation for remarriage, in coping with the problems of being in a remarried family and in educating for the changes which must take place if that family system is to be effective and creative. The workshop was designed to meet the needs of Pima County, Arizona, with its high divorce rate and related high number of remarriages.

The literature has indicated, and we have confirmed in our experience, the complexity and confusion of remarriages to the family system. Couples have related to us the need for help in resolution of the confusion and the

need for coping skills to handle the complexities. The complexity begins with the realization that as a couple they are working through the sensitive task of coupling at the same time most are in demand as parents.

Our own formation of a remarried family has brought us into direct involvement with these complexities and confusions. As we have faced the issues associated with this new dimension and have learned new coping skills, we have desired to share them with others in order that remarried families can function more effectively and creatively.

Not much attention has been directed to the remarried family. Only limited literature is available, although in the last few years more research has begun and more information and more programs are available. In our workshop we have drawn from a large number of these sources as well as our own experience. We have focused the workshop on the couple in the remarried family, believing that as the couple has strength, so does the family. Even so, we have made the whole remarried family system the key to the workshop. The remarried family system is multi-faceted and complex, and only as it is viewed as a whole can its joy and creativity and its problems be captured and understood.

Our emphasis has been educational, not therapy. Couples may have been or may be in therapy, and the workshop is not designed in that perspective. Rather, we believe that in our time-limited sessions, the educational format acts as a complement to therapy. Couples are encouraged to come together for the four week, two and one-half hour sessions, but singles are not discouraged from attending.

The purpose of the workshop is to promote development of a balanced, effectively working family system. Our goals are to provide information about

the remarriage process; to help couples develop understanding of their particular situations; and to give some communication skills to these couples for use in their families.

II. PROCESS FOR THE WORKSHOP

The workshop is developed with a multi-dimensional approach in mind. We are concerned with cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes. We believe that these operate not in exclusion from one another, and therefore we have sought to integrate them in the workshop. We also believe that the group working together provides for mutual stimulation and mutual support. As trust develops among group members, there is more self-disclosure which leads to more self-disclosure. We have been intentional in disclosure of our remarriage -- its joys and problems in order to encourage this sharing. With more self-disclosure comes the realization of similarities among them. As the communication grows deeper, there are deeper expressions of all feelings from anger to sorrow to joy.

It is expected that the group will share in the on-going development of the workshop by suggesting issues for discussion. The workshop is flexible enough to accommodate those needs. The workshop functions through didactic presentations, leader led exercises, group interaction, and homework.

Didactic Presentations

We introduce each session of the workshop with a didactic presentation in which we discuss the dilemmas of the problem areas, factors influencing adjustment, and new ways of viewing the remarried experience. Leader structured-leader induced exercises are designed to assist in focusing the group on various aspects of the issues.

Group Work

Dyads, triads, and other small group involvements are a part of the group process. Non-partner dyads are used at times in order to encourage open sharing of feelings and problems. Couples are given writing tasks for further exploration of issues. As an example, couples are encouraged to list as clearly and explicitly as possible the conscious and explore the unconscious expectations they have for their marriage and then to discuss these. Role-playing and modeling is also used as a means of exploring deeper dimensions of specific issues and to encourage changing of behavior.

Homework

As a part of each session a homework assignment is given to the couple. This homework is specific and realistic with action responses built in with hopes that it will be used with the entire family.

III. CONTENT OF THE WORKSHOP

The four workshop sessions include:

Session One - introduction to the workshop, group trust building, introduction to the communication skills to be used in the workshop, and a discussion on the process of loss.

Session Two - an overview of remarriage; discussion of myths, realities and issues of remarriage; and the complexity of remarriage.

Session Three - the prior claims that are present in the remarried family and handling the residuals from the prior relationship.

Session Four - relationship with children and the issues surrounding step-parenting.

Communication Skill-building

In every session basic communication skills are introduced and practiced. These communication exercises are introduced in the first session and utilized in the subsequent sessions. The two key skills practiced are active listening and the giving of "I" messages. As these two skills are practiced, the concept of negotiation is introduced and practiced.

A problem-solving model is introduced which utilizes the skills mentioned above, and with practice on the establishment of ownership of the problem, we focus a great deal of attention on conflict resolution which we have found to be a basic element in the development of creative and effective remarried families. The reason for the attention given to this area comes from the realization that oftentimes remarried couples and families will do anything to avoid conflict for fear that any conflict might lead to a breakup of this family. Strategies are taught and practiced that can be used with the entire family.

Communication skill-building becomes a key element in the workshop. We have found it to be helpful and important for the couples. We realize, however, that all the communication skills in the world will do no good if they are not used. We have discovered that many persons in remarriages, because of previous experiences, will not communicate because they are afraid to listen or to present grievances. The inability to communicate often indicates a fear that the relationship is in trouble, and in remarriage this is intensely frightening. In remarried families, therefore, it is very important to recognize communication patterns and to work through any blocks if the relationship is to be creative and growing. The workshop is designed to help in this process.

Loss and the Acceptance of Autonomy

1. Object/Role Loss

The first session additionally focuses on the past experience of loss in an attempt to understand where each member has been. We are aware in any loss whether through divorce, death, change of job or change of location there are really two kinds of loss - the object loss and the role loss. The distinction is particularly important when working through the grieving process with the loss of a partner. Many times we find it not so difficult to grieve or accept the loss of an object such as a spouse, particularly if the marriage has been full of disturbances as so often happens before a divorce. It is more difficult to accept the personal loss of the "role" of wife, husband, father, confidante, friend, cook, protector, etc. The grieving process has to be viewed from the personal loss of a role as well as the object.

2. The Grieving Process

The literature which is being written has made us aware that the process of accepting any loss is similar. The steps, stages or phases that one "goes through" are interrelated, never in the same sequences and continually recycling long after the actual physical separation. Grieving is a process and cannot be viewed as one isolated incident. Many times subsequent relationships built during the crisis of grieving are, in fact, part of the process rather than isolated relationships of their own. The grief stages persons find themselves in over and over are:

(1) Denial/Shock - No, it's not real! The symptoms may be numbness, unconnectedness, aloofness. The messages we tell ourself may include: "I know he'll return," "She won't be happy with him, either," "This isn't really happening to me," "We'll only

separate for a few weeks in order to work out the problems," "He just needs a little time to see things in perspective."

(2) Anger/Resentment. In this second stage, there are many non-directed feelings of hostility -- some towards spouse, children, parents, ("It was their fault I married him.") and even self ("Why was I so stupid.") Anger often is an emotional release for underlying feelings of resentment, rejection, failure, guilt, and many other feelings associated with loss that need to be expressed.

(3) Bargaining. As one begins to accept ("Yes, but ...") there are attempts to hold off the acceptance as long as possible. There may even be attempts at reconciliation. "Now, we've had some time apart ..." "If I had been a better wife ..." "If I had only been aware of how unhappy she was ..." "If I lose 10 pounds, maybe ..." "If we go to counseling ..."

(4) Depression. Finally one begins to see and feel reality, but does not yet feel comfortable with it. Depression is a way of turning inside with questions of "How am I going to make it?" "Can I really survive." "Am I OK?" There is much grieving, sadness, turning in and away from others. It's a time of finally learning we have inner strengths to draw from.

(5) Acceptance. Only after the inner strengths and new directions are found, can the past be put into perspective. Only after the divorce/death and the marriage are a part of the accepted past can a person go on to a new identity, a new "whole" person. Out of the anger, denial, bargaining and depression comes a vision as well as a struggle for the survival of self

as an autonomous, alive, alone individual. In order to be free to trust and accept other new relationships, this stage MUST be reached! New relationships are usually short-lived before this and lacking in real trust and acceptance. Until this point there is far too much fear of loss to be able to totally open and connect with another person. If, however, a marriage occurs before the process is completed, it oftentimes will be a stormy and difficult relationship because of the personal struggle compounded by the struggles of remarriage in and of itself. (See Diagram No. One for an illustration of the process of remarriage.)

Remarriage: Practical Issues and Myths

The second session focuses on understanding the complexities and concerns in remarriage. A couple must be aware of the difficult process they have individually gone through to get to this point. If in that awareness, the process has not been completed, they will become aware of additional necessary work in the workshop.

It is perhaps with a new feeling of self-knowledge and a need to be in a relationship in order to grow, change and live more fully, that four out of five persons remarry, usually within three years. It is our assumption that most persons never get to or want to reach such a level of autonomy that they have no need for another person. There are many reasons to remarry, such as the need for companionship (sexually as well as in other ways), a need for the children to have two parents, or the need for more social acceptance in certain groups or sub-systems of our society. The American people do in fact live in a couple's world and are basically social human beings.

Remarriage and step-parenting is surrounded by myths and expectations. Probably the most devastating and pervasive myth that couples hold onto is the belief that the recreated family can form a family unit similar to the biological family; that the stepfamily should function as does a natural family. Most think that it will. It can't. The children do not belong to the step-parent. And they never will. In the traditional sense of marriage, the spouse with prior children does not totally belong to the other person and never will. One of the hardest things to accept is that somebody else has had a prior claim to that spouse or that child.

The other realities to be discussed during the first session center around the financial aspects of remarriage. When both people come into a marriage with prior money, income, properties, possessions, and furniture, many concerns arise in dealing with combined assets. The financial considerations, along with prior claim and children, are one of the major issues in remarriage. However, the majority of stated concerns center around the day-to-day, on-going "hassles" that exist also in first marriages, but many times impact more intensely on subsequent ones.

Prior Claim

One of the constant pressures surrounding a remarriage is the issue of prior claim. This includes not only the reality that there was a "first" spouse, but there are also prior places, memories, friends, contacts, influence, furniture, photographs, and relationships that must be lived through, understood and talked about. All can complicate the remarriage if the excess baggage is used in anger or without forethought. Memories will not kill a remarriage if they are put in proper perspective. The third session is concerned with these issues.

Individuals who remarry differ to the extent that most have gone through the grieving and are indeed truly separated and accepting of the past. Often, however, the past partner may still be the object of attachment -- including continuation of intense emotions such as jealousy, rivalry, triumph, guilt and sometimes with remaining responsibilities and true caring. In some ways, first marriages never really end -- one always lives with the vibrations of other people who were part of the old life. Constant reminders become living ghosts that go along with every remarriage.

In an attempt to work through and accept these realities, the session focuses on the awareness of the residuals -- learning how to express the fears and hurts they create and working to an understanding that as time, new places, people and memories are established, the remarriage becomes more stable and whole.

Step-parenting

The fourth session focuses on the specific concerns of the children in a remarriage. As has been said, remarriage creates tremendous complexities. (Diagram No. Two shows two typical children with both "natural" parents remarried.) The increased number of primary relationships these remarriages have made for the children (not including aunts, uncles or cousins) cause great complexities. As with relationships, all other aspects for the child in a remarriage are greatly complicated.

Half of all remarriages include and obviously have strong impact on children. The same myths exist that somehow overnight this family could possibly go merrily along a similar manner of a natural family. We find, however, there are very specific concerns and frustrations in dealing with children:

First, the step-parent is the newcomer to an established system. The roles of the step-parent have not yet been defined by our society and many times are not worked through before the marriage. The feeling of being an outsider, and of having little influence on the running of the household or the disciplining of the children may cause resentment, ambiguity and a real lack of identity for the step-parent.

Second, society has not established easy or understandable names for step-parents. Children, other family members, and friends become confused in making introductions, explanations or clarifications. Over and over the "difference" of the remarried family is pointed out.

Third, children and parents struggle with the question of loyalty. The in-home parent wants to continue the relationship with the children without their feeling pushed aside when a new partner arrives on the scene. Usually the step-parent begins the relationship interested in the future spouse, not the children, and the initial need is to be with only that person. In addition, if the step-parent has children either in the home or with an ex-spouse, the fear of pushing aside the "natural" children becomes a struggle. The children, too, whether the natural parent is dead or out of the home, struggle with loyalty for the real parent as feelings grow for the step-parent. If forced to make choices,the child will always choose the natural parent, and the step-parent WILL ALWAYS LOSE! The children also may feel a loss of the in-home parent, especially if the family system had existed as a single-parent system for a period of time. The newcomer becomes an intruder on their time with the only parent they perceive is remaining.

This last session also attempts to make the struggles of each member of the new family real for everyone else. With the couple as the key in learning

to ask for what they need and expressing personal fears and concerns to each other, we reinforce communications which can lead to on-going problem solving and conflict management. The session centers on spousal concerns, ways of expressing fears, doubts, and uncertainties, and the growth of acceptance for each family member.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have attempted to outline the concerns of remarriage as we have developed them in a workshop for remarrying and remarried couples. Because we are experiencing more in our relationship, more literature is being written and research developing; and because each group of persons in the workshop is different with often unique and important problems, the workshop is in constant flux. The basic process and issues, however, remain, and we have presented these in hopes that they will increase interest and create new opportunities for the growing numbers of remarried families in our society.

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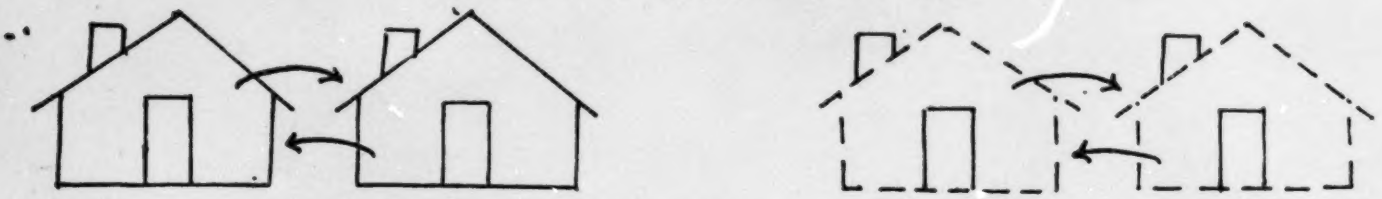
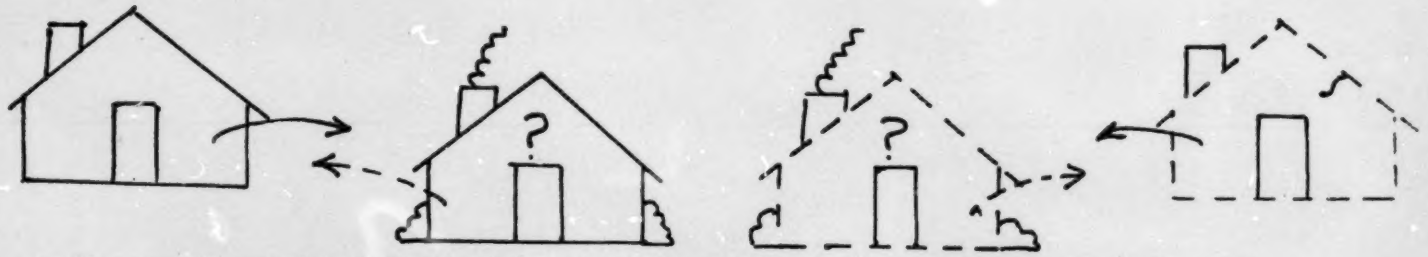
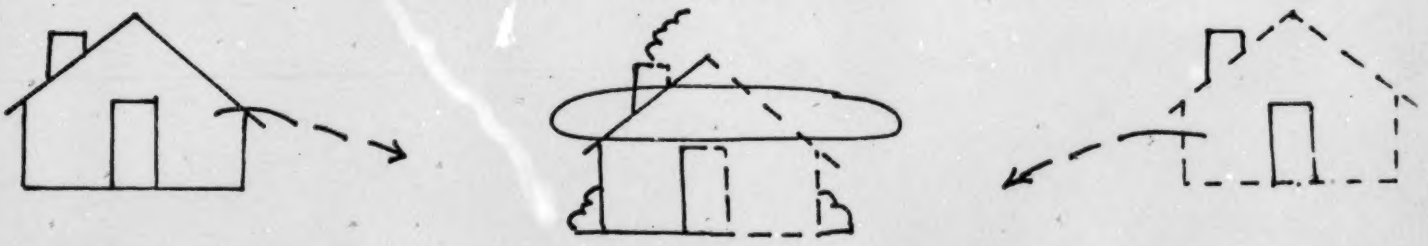
REMARRIAGE: THE BLENDING OF TWO HOMES



I. Two households of autonomous adults or adults with children, each having a relationship with an ex-spouse or former ties to children or others.



II. Two households begin to join - some uncertainty as to future or means to reach commitment stage. May begin to cut off any relationship with former ties. Relationships with children not in the home may become strained.

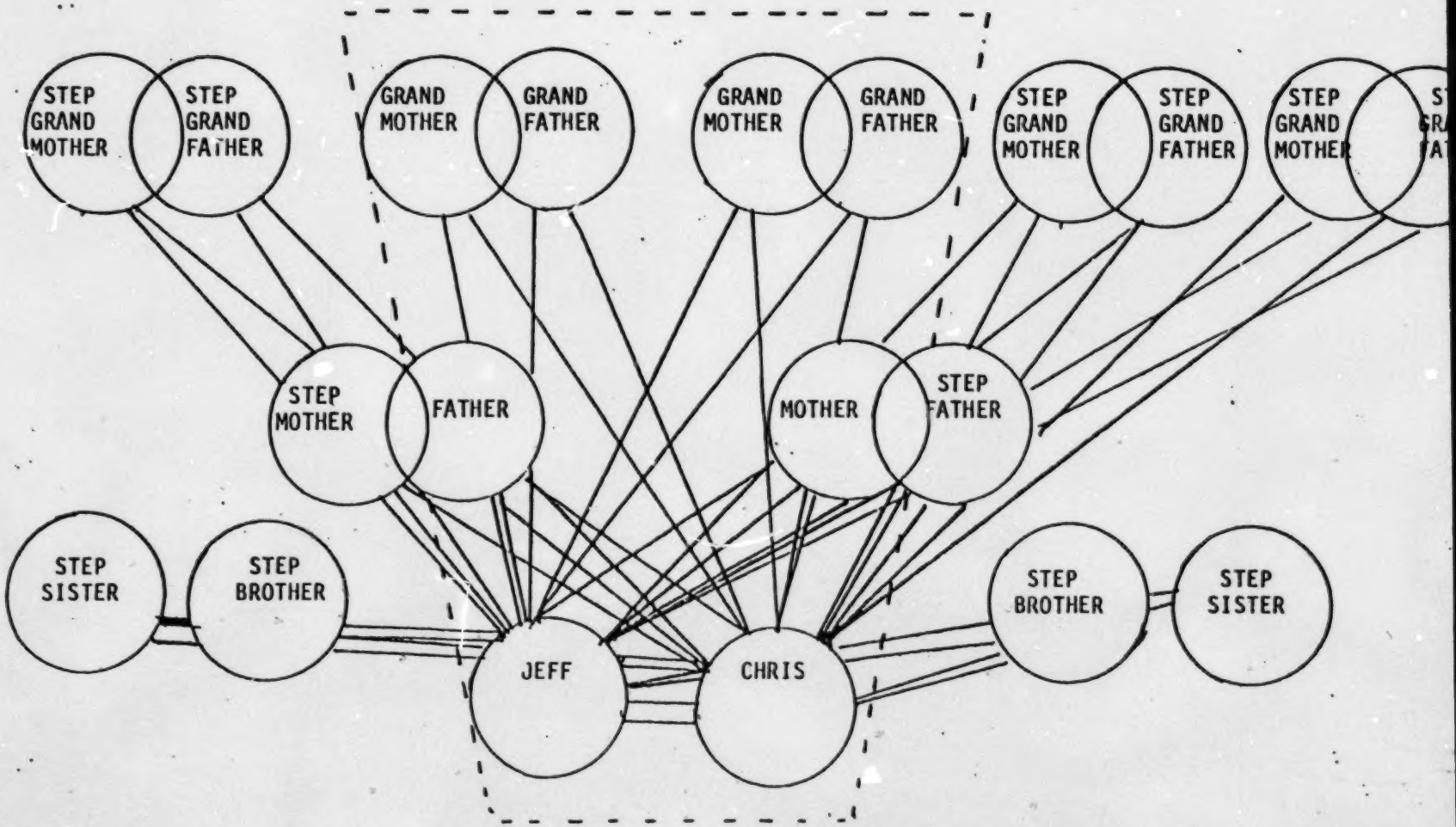


III. One household of two families - little integration but in "honeymoon" stage - all will be well! Former ties are "forgotten or pushed aside for a while."

IV. As integration begins, the honeymoon may end. Reality may bring insecurities of past loyalties and prior claim. Children, ex-spouses, financial concerns cause difficulties.

V. One household can exist integrated into a "new" family when conflict can be accepted, worked through, when prior claims can be put in perspective and honest openness can be established with remarried couple.

A BLENDED FAMILY SYSTEM



In the primary family system, there were seven primary relationships with which each child has to relate. In this blended family system, each child will relate to nineteen primary relationships.